

The Carnival

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The next day the adults tell the story of how they left me at the house and they laugh about it now, because everything turned out alright, thank God. But I don't think it's funny. They were hours away before they realized I wasn't in the car, they say, and I don't think any of this is funny at all.

My mother tells me that we're going to the carnival today and it's just for me, but I don't believe her. I know that my uncle will be there and my aunt won't and I don't want to go, so I cross my arms and I keep them that way. On the way there they turn to me in the back seat, telling me about all the rides I'll get to go on and that I can have some cotton candy when we get there. I keep my arms crossed and I don't say a word, even though cotton candy is my favorite.

My mother wants me to hold her hand so I don't get lost, but I refuse. I keep my arms crossed as we walk through the maze of people and it's not very long before my mother hooks her arm in his and forgets about me again. I stop in front of the cotton candy stand and I watch as they continue walking ahead of me. I don't yell out for them. I just wait to see if they'll notice, because here's the cotton candy, right here, and I'm not getting any, am I? Pretty soon, they get mixed up in the crowd and I don't see them anymore. Somebody comes up to me and asks me if I'm lost and it hits me that she was right again. I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes.

My uncle comes running back to me with my mother following behind him screaming, "Oh my God, Oh my God!" She tells me, "I told you to hold my hand, now see what happened? You got lost again, didn't you?" She reaches out to grab my hand but I yell, "No!" like a brat because I'm just a kid and I don't care if she's right. I'm not doing it. It's up to her to look after me whether I'm holding her hand or not. I take my uncles hand, but only because I don't want to get lost again. I'm mad at him too.

I make them stop in front of the bumper cars and they tell me I'm too little. My head has to reach the red line for me to ride it by myself. The carnival man tells me I can ride the other bumper cars and he points to a baby ride that goes around in circles. "No," I say sternly, "I want to drive it myself."

My mom says, "Honey you're too little, let's go to the other ride," and my uncle agrees.

"No!" I scream as loud as I can, "I want to ride this one. This one!" And I stomp my feet and yell at the top of my lungs because I don't have any cotton candy and they forgot about me and this was supposed to be just for me.

The carnival man tells them that someone has to ride with me so my mother sits down and puts me nervously in her lap. She pushes the pedal, screams in my ear and turns the wheel directly into the cushioned wall. She wants to just sit there and wave at my uncle. I want to drive the car. I look behind me at all the other kids pushing the pedal and driving into each other.

"Look at the camera," she says, and I see my uncle posed to take our picture. After the picture is taken, my uncle reaches in and turns the wheel away from the wall. "Go on," he says.

"Let's go!" I say, because I know we don't have very much time. My mother turns the wheel back and forth and makes engine noises with her mouth, but we're just sitting there. "Push the gas," I tell her but she's laughing and smiling at my uncle just outside the cushioned wall. I slide down so my shoulders are in her lap. I stretch out my leg and press the pedal as hard as I can. As we bolt forward I slide off her. My butt hits the rubber mat between her feet and I can hear the sparks zapping above my head. The force catches her off guard. Her body slides sideways and she grabs the armrest with both hands so she doesn't fall off. I can't see where we're going, but I don't take my foot off the pedal. I'm laughing when we hit the wall on the other side.

"Again!" I say, but she's already getting out of the car and pulling me with her, screaming, "Get off! Get off! Hurry!"

I see another car headed toward us and over the music and the sparks and the laughter, I can hear the carnival man on the speaker say, "Do not get off the ride until the music stops." Then more sternly, "Ma'am, stay in the car."

My uncle runs to the other side of the rink and he is yelling, "June, stay in the car!" But it's too late. She is already picking me up and trying to hand me over the railing to my uncle, so he takes me. I watch as she turns to face the boy who is driving his car straight toward her. She presses her back to the railing and lets out a blood curdling scream while her hands dance around her face in dramatic flair. The boy is laughing at her and so am I.

I look at the other cars and the other kids and the other parents and see them smiling as their cars gently bump into each other. I realize then, that they're not going very fast. My mother has plenty of time to step away, but she doesn't. Instead, the whole thing plays out in comic slow motion, my mother frozen in terror, screaming like something out of a horror movie as a bright pink, pig-faced bumper car slowly creeps toward her. The boy turns the wheel sharp and there's a lag before the car actually goes in the other direction. I hear the sluggish click, click, click of the sparks as the music is turned off and everything slows to a stop.

5. The Closet

When we get home to California, Kleeko is gone. She won't tell me where he is or when he's coming back so I hide in the closet. I'm almost asleep when she finally comes to my room and calls my name.

"Char?"

It's quiet for a long time after she says it and I picture her standing in the middle of the braided rug, plotting. Then, she says it again a little louder.

"Char?"

I hear her footsteps creeping toward the closet and I wonder what I'll do when she finds me. She doesn't like being alone. She's probably nervous now. It would be funny if I jumped out and scared her.

As the door to the closet creaks open I can see the shadow of her wrist on the knob. Then, a crack of light points at me where I am crouched down, arms crossed. Once she catches my frame in the corner, she throws the door open all the way and the light from the room exposes part of her face. Her wide eyes meet mine but I do nothing. As she stares at me there's a wildness to her that I haven't yet seen, like she's finally had enough and she's either going to collapse or explode. I can't tell if it is anger or fear in her eyes, so I scan the rest of her to figure it out. The shadows play tricks with the light on her face, but I think it's fear. Yes, she's afraid of me. That's definitely what I see.

Just as I squint back at her to tell her with my eyes that I know she's afraid, the door slams in my face so hard that my whole body feels the blow. I close my eyes as the ringing in my ears echoes through me. She is quiet outside the door. She knows I'm in here and she's just standing there.

Then, I hear a shriek, a howl really, and it hits me in the chest with a heavy thud. It's the sound a person would make if they were being cut in half by a chainsaw, a sound that is meant to alert the neighbors sitting quietly on their lawn chairs behind their private fences. My body, still vibrating from the first blow, jerks a second time. Panic ripples outward from my chest and my limbs twitch nervously in response.

Then I hear her calling, "My baby! My baby!" But it fades quickly as she gets farther away from the closet, toward the front door. "Somebody's taken her!" Another door slams then, but it doesn't shake the floor this time so I don't jerk quite as hard. I can faintly hear her screaming, "Help!" Drawing out the word for as long as her lungs can keep it going. I imagine she is running down the street, shaking her head and holding her cheeks again.

I don't know what all this is for and I don't know what comes next, but I don't cry. Soon, I can hear people inside our house opening and shutting doors and telling my mother, "We'll find her, June. We'll find her."

"I already checked in there," I hear her yell out. "She's not there. She's gone."

"Did you look in the closet?"

"Yes, yes, I already looked in the closet," she cries, "Somebody took her. I just know it! Oh God!"

"Where was she the last time you saw her?"

"I don't know. I can't think. I don't know!"

"June, where did you see her last?" Another voice says.

"Outside," she screams. "She was just out there in the yard and now she's gone," she wails.

"Oh my God. My baby! My poor baby!"

I hear people head outside, but the man from next door comes into my room and checks the closet, even though she told him not to. When he sees me in the corner he shakes his head and says in a pleasant voice, "Well, there you are. What are you doing in there?"

I don't know what I'm doing in here so I don't answer. He smiles and reaches out his hand.

"I found her!" He yells, turning his head toward the door.

"Oh, thank God," I hear a woman's voice say from the other room.

People begin to file into my bedroom one by one. One of them shakes their head at me and says, "You gave your mom quite a scare, young lady."

My mother walks in last. A woman has her arm wrapped around her shoulders tight, like she's trying to hold her together because her whole body is shaking now, not just her head. She's breathing funny on purpose, pretending she can't catch her breath.

She reaches out to me with a longing in her eyes, but she's looking through me, behind me, longing for something far beyond what I am capable of giving her. The man from next door blocks her at the doorway with his hand and whispers, "June, you need to be calm. Show her that you're happy to see her and that you're not mad at her." Deep guttural noises that almost sound like words spit from her mouth. He is holding her back by the shoulders, trapping her like a race horse at the gate, trying to tell her how to be a mother but she doesn't listen. She continues to reach past him, to the thing she is longing for, the thing that's not me.

He releases her and even though she is coming toward me, arms open wide, I can't help but feel that she will run right past me, leap over the furniture, climb out the window and keep running.

"Your mother loves you," he says as I stiffen under her embrace.

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